ABLA
Agri-Business Learning Alliances



# Agribusiness Learning Alliance (ABLA) Toolkit

For Business Development in Agriculture Research for Development

ABLA
Agri-Business Learning Alliances



## Key Support Institutions and Funders

OACPS R&I

FARA
Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa

EAFF

ASARECA
Transforming Agriculture for Improved Livelihoods

## AIRTEA FUNDER

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# INTRODUCTION

The Agri-business Learning Alliance (ABLA) is an initiative aimed at promoting entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector through market-centric learning. ABLA builds on a long tradition of using innovation platforms to drive the adoption and scaling-up of agricultural research technologies and associated innovations. In this learning material, we will explore the concept of innovation platforms and their role in driving agricultural development. We will also delve into the different aspects of commercialization in agriculture and how ABLA is positioned to drive this process.

## Purpose and overview of the toolkit

This tool aims to help boost investments in innovations and entrepreneurship, especially among women and young people who may have limited access to resources and opportunities in specific industries. The goal is to form alliances that can strengthen innovation platforms and tackle various challenges, such as a lack of information, skills, understanding of value chains, and private sector involvement, which can often lead to unreliable production, low volumes, and poor-quality local products.

## Innovation Platforms

Innovation platforms are essentially a network of partners working on a common theme and using research knowledge creatively to generate goods and services for the benefit of all, especially smallholder farmers, women, youth, and other disadvantaged social categories in agricultural innovation systems. Strategic innovation platforms



address high-level governance and management issues, operational innovation platforms address community-level issues relating to commodity or production systems, while innovation clusters often address issues relating to the nodes of the respective value chains. To accomplish their objectives, innovation platforms rely on the diverse competencies and experiences of their key stakeholders, partners, and beneficiary actors. Depending on their varying configurations, agricultural innovation platforms can be formally or informally organized, governed, and managed.

## Agri-business Learning Alliance

An agri-business learning alliance refers to a market-centric learning milieu that enables entrepreneurship capacity-strengthening among its users in an open and inclusive process along specific developmental pathways. An ABLA aims to facilitate the process of establishing and strengthening strategic linkages among private sector, farmers, researchers, civil society, legal authorities, and extensionists in specific value chains.

ABLA serves as a platform to collate and integrate learning on business development leading to generation of solutions and capacity development to address business constraints and bringing business ideas to scale for socio-economic benefits of the key stakeholders, partners, and beneficiary actors. In driving commercialization of agricultural research technologies and associated innovations, ABLA will need to ensure provision of business development services, advocate for collective scaling, ensure product uptake, attract private sector investments, and ensure inclusion of women, youth, and persons with disability in all the above-mentioned facets. Ultimately, ABLA is aimed at promoting entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector through market-centric learning.

**Business Model -** describes how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value, in economic, social, cultural or other contexts.

**Business Plan -** road map with goals, methods for attaining those goals, and the timeframe for achieving the goals.

**Entrepreneurship -** the ability and desire to identify opportunities, establish, administer and succeed in a business venture along with risk entitled to it.

**Business venture -** new agriculture-related enterprises or businesses created or merged to take the competitive advantage of the research products to increase profitability

**Learning Route -** a capacity-building tool, organized as a planned journey and thematically structured around specific learning objectives to respond to particular knowledge needs

**Inclusivity -** the practice of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those having physical or mental disabilities or belonging to other minority groups



# UNDERSTANDING THE AGRI-BUSINESS LEARNING ALLIANCES

## Brief on Agriculture Innovation Systems

In order to understand agribusiness learning alliances, it is important to first understand the concept of the innovation system. An innovation system is a group of organizations and individuals focused on

a. The generation, diffusion, adoption, and utilization of new knowledge
b. The context and institutions that govern the interactions and processes that take place in that process

Innovations ordinarily address specific problems resulting in socio-economic gains to beneficiaries. Types of innovations include product innovation, process innovation and service delivery innovation. Agricultural innovation systems are characteristically integral parts of broader innovation systems; essentially embodying agricultural value chains, production systems, an enabling environment of policies and institutions and the associated actors.

A critical function at all levels of the agricultural innovation system is the planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Considering the power of the nested inter-connectedness of the different levels of operation in any agricultural innovation system, it is important that systemic objectives inform participating organizational objectives. Likewise, the latter should inform lower-level objectives at the program and project levels. The more aligned the objectives are at the different levels of operation, the more they are likely to synergize for greater effect at outcome and impact levels. To ensure a harmonized approach, it is important that ABLA governance, management, and the Planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning units be fully committed to the alignment principal.

Key Functions and Actors of an Agriculture Innovation System

| Critical Functions | Critical Actors |
|---|---|
| Planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (PME&L) | Governance and management structures, PME&L units |
| Genetic improvement | CGIAR and the NARS (including universities) and the private sector. |
| Breeding crops & livestock | NARS, private sector. |
| Seed systems | NARES, community-based seed multipliers and distributors, private sector |
| Crop & livestock production and post-harvest handling | Smallholder & large-scale agricultural producers |
| Food processing and value addition | Household & community level food processors, agro-industrial processors |
| Retail and consumption | Farm gate sellers, aggregators, farmers' markets, national cereals and produce boards, supermarkets, international markets, consumers. |
| Policy advocacy platforms | Continental and regional policy dialogue platforms (e.g., FARA, ASARECA, CCARDES, ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, IGAD, AGRF), national policy fora. |
| The Media | Television e.g., Shamba Shape-Up, drama, video, print and music; radio (e.g., Farm Radio International) and Twitter handles. |
| Policy Making | National governmental policy formulation structures, multilateral policy formulation structures (e.g., sub-regional and regional policy formulation fora. |
| Partners and technical assistance | CGIAR, UN agencies (e.g., FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP), Scaling Up Nutrition movement. |
| Quality control and regulations | National bureaus of standards. |

## Goal of Agricultural Innovation System

The primary goal of an agricultural innovation system is to enhance the welfare of all stakeholders, partners, and beneficiaries. This can be achieved through increased

incomes, improved food security and nutrition, and enhanced environmental services, even in the face of climate change. In order to achieve these objectives, the following steps should be taken:

***Scale up inclusive agricultural productivity:*** It is important to ensure that all social categories, including women and youth, are included in agricultural productivity. This will help to increase production levels to meet the needs of a growing population, both rural and urban.

***Build effective value chains:*** The success of agriculture innovation depends on thriving and profitable crops and livestock value chains. This requires profitable seed systems, production systems, post-harvest management systems, branding, advertising, and marketing systems, supportive policies, and institutions.

***Establish multi-sectoral innovation platforms:*** It is essential to establish multi-sectoral innovation platforms that can help to bring together different stakeholders in the agriculture sector. This includes farmers, researchers, agro-processors, and policymakers. These platforms should encourage input from all stakeholders to ensure that all perspectives are taken into account.

***Foster political will:*** Political will is essential to the success of any agricultural innovation system. Governments must be committed to providing the necessary resources and support to ensure that these systems are successful.

***Ensure adequate agricultural infrastructure:*** Adequate agricultural infrastructure is essential for the success of any agricultural innovation system. This includes things like irrigation systems, transportation, and storage facilities.

***Provide affordable financing:*** Access to affordable financing is critical for small-scale farmers who may not have the capital to invest in new technologies or equipment.

***Monitor, evaluate, and learn:*** It is important to continuously monitor, evaluate, and learn from the agricultural innovation system.

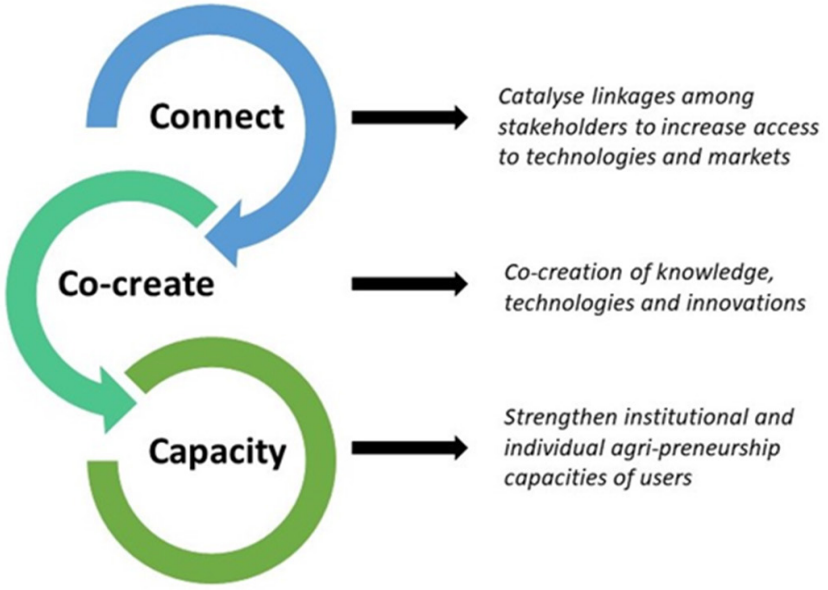
Considering the power of the nested inter-connectedness of the different levels of operation in any agricultural innovation system, it is important that systemic objectives inform participating organizational objectives. Likewise, the latter should inform lower-level objectives at the program and project levels. The more aligned the objectives are

at the different levels of operation, the more they are likely to synergize for greater effect at outcome and impact levels. To ensure a harmonized approach, it is important that ABLA governance, management and the PME&L units be fully committed to the alignment principal.

## Objectives of Agribusiness Learning Alliances

To establish an Agri-Business Learning Alliance (ABLA), you need to create a learning environment that is market-centric and supports entrepreneurship capacity-building in an open and inclusive way. This should happen along specific developmental pathways.

The primary objective of an ABLA is to facilitate the process of building strategic linkages among different stakeholders, including the private sector, farmers, researchers, civil society, legal authorities, and extensionists, in specific value chains. This collaboration can help address challenges and improve the overall quality and output of local products.




To set up an ABLA, you first need to identify any relevant policy frameworks or organizations, develop a business model, and use a co-creative or adaptive approach based on

specific needs and business knowledge. The idea is to create a platform where people can collaborate, share knowledge, and generate solutions that can help address business constraints and bring business ideas to scale. Ultimately, an ABLA should serve as a platform to bring together learning on business development and build the capacity to overcome obstacles and achieve success in agricultural research for development.



# ESTABLISHING AGRIBUSINESS LEARNING ALLIANCES

To establish an Agricultural Business Alliance (ABLA), the following steps should be followed:

## CONNECT:
### Identify Priority Value Chains and Connecting Nodes

Identify priority value chains and their respective nodes. This toolkit is designed from a capacity gap assessment that identified livestock, aquaculture, dairy, grains, roots and tubers, and vegetables as the most important value chains. The toolkit also recognizes extension and advisory services as a cross-cutting supporting mechanism.

Identified nodes included seed systems, production systems, food processing, post-harvest management systems, nutrition education, branding, advertising, marketing, and policy analysis. Other cross-cutting service areas included agricultural extension, information technology, and climate change.

### Develop a Commercialization Model for Agricultural Research and Technologies

The first step in establishing an ABLA framework is to develop a commercialization model for agricultural research, technologies, and associated innovations. This model should contextualize the environment within which technologies and innovations are utilized in response to varying socio-economic needs of the respective actors in the agricultural innovation systems. This would form the context within which the envisaged framework for establishing ABLA would be conceived.

## CO-CREATE:
### Assess Competencies and Identify Gaps

For each of the identified competencies in the knowledge, interpersonal skills, and technical skills domains, resulting patterns point to areas of focus with the greatest efficiencies in either harnessing collective action based on identified areas of strength for mutual gain or developing capacity-strengthening interventions to fill identified gaps.

## Carry out a Capacity Gap Assessment

The second step is to carry out a capacity gap assessment. This assessment will help identify priority value chains and their respective nodes to enable more effective and efficient value chain development. There are three key areas to consider for capacity building: knowledge domains, technical skills, and interpersonal skills. This toolkit will provide recommendations for each of these areas based on capacity gaps assessment across different value chains.

# CAPACITY:
## Develop a Systemic Approach to Capacity Strengthening Interventions

Based on the identified gaps, develop capacity-strengthening interventions to fill the gaps. In some instances, it may make sense to organize double-barreled interventions within a specific value chain, while in some instances it may make greater sense to organize interventions among value chains with similar interests in respective nodes. The interventions could be to facilitate enhanced utilization of agricultural technologies and associated innovations.

## Provide Business Development Services (BDS)

Business development services are the non-financial services that support the growth and competitiveness of businesses in a value chain. Business development services can be provided by different actors such as public agencies, private firms, non-governmental organizations or farmer associations. BDS are important because they can help entrepreneurs run their businesses more effectively. If used appropriately, they can also act as an enhancer of access to finance and an alternative form of "collateral" in situations where tangible collateral may be an impediment to meeting traditional security requirements.

In conclusion, establishing an ABLA framework requires the development of a business model for agricultural research and technologies, reviewing the capacity gap assessment database, identifying priority value chains and their respective nodes, assessing competencies, and developing capacity-strengthening interventions. This approach will

help to harness collective action based on identified areas of strength for mutual gain and address capacity gaps for efficient and effective utilization of agricultural technologies and innovations.



# BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT SERVICES (BDS) IN AGRICULTURE

Business Development Services (BDS) are essential tools for creating value chains that benefit smallholders and improve farmer performance. In this instructional material, we will discuss the importance of BDS, its goals, and its impact on economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction.

This toolkit aims to provide a brief overview of BDS and encourage greater awareness and utilization of these services in agricultural innovation systems. By doing so, businesses can improve their performance and scale their technology. Research has shown that BDS can improve small and medium-sized enterprises' (SME) performance through increased productivity and access to new markets.

## What are Business Development Services (BDS)?

Business Development Services (BDS) is a set of services that support Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the agriculture and agribusiness sector. BDS refers to a variety of non-financial services that entrepreneurs can use to enhance their business performance, access new markets, and improve their ability to compete. These services include training, business advisory services, access to finance, market linkages, and technology transfer.

They are non-financial services and products that can be provided to entrepreneurs at various stages of their business needs. These services are primarily focused on skills transfer and business advice. There are a variety of business support options available that can be tailored to suit the needs of small businesses. However, it's important to apply key benchmarks to ensure that the support provided is effective.

## Why is BDS important?

BDS plays a vital role in promoting economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction in developing countries. By providing support to SMEs, BDS enables farmers to access critical resources necessary to improve their agro-enterprises' productivity and quality. BDS

also helps farmers to overcome barriers to entry, such as lack of access to finance and technical expertise.

## BDS's goals are to:

- Strengthen SMEs in the agriculture and agribusiness sector.
- Build the capacity of SMEs to access critical resources, including finance, training, and technology.
- Create value chains that benefit smallholders and improve farmer performance.
- Promote economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction.

## How does BDS impact economic growth?

SMEs play a crucial role in economic growth, as they contribute significantly to both employment and economic activity. BDS helps SMEs to access critical resources and overcome barriers to entry, enabling them to grow and expand their businesses. As SMEs grow, they create jobs, increase productivity, and generate wealth, contributing to overall economic growth.

BDS is essential for promoting economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction. By providing critical support to SMEs in the agriculture and agribusiness sector, BDS creates value chains that benefit smallholders and improve farmer performance. Through BDS, SMEs can access critical resources necessary to grow and expand their businesses, contributing to overall economic growth.

Information, advisory, consultancy, and mentoring programs can support entrepreneurs and small business owners in all aspects of starting and operating a business. BDS can be delivered by public agencies, private organizations, or not-for-profit organizations, either in generic form or customized to suit specific needs. They can be delivered through physical centers, via telephone, or online. BDS can be offered as standalone services or integrated into other programs. They may be offered at no cost to the client, at a government-subsidized rate, or on a full user-pay basis.

## Types of Business Development Services for Value Chain Actors

- Production services: These are the services that help value chain actors to produce or obtain quality inputs or products. They include:
    - Technical assistance: providing information, advice and training on what to grow, how to grow it, what inputs to use, how to control pests and diseases,

when and how to harvest; based on market demand and best practices.
    - Input supply: providing access to quality and affordable seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, feeds or vaccines that enhance productivity and profitability.
    - Quality assurance: providing testing, certification or inspection services that ensure the quality and safety of inputs or products.
- Post-production services: These are the services that help value chain actors to process, package, store and distribute their products. They include:
    - Processing: providing access to equipment, facilities or technologies that transform products into different forms or products that add value and meet consumer preferences.
    - Packaging: providing access to materials, designs or technologies that protect products from damage and enhance their appearance.
    - Storage: providing access to facilities, conditions or technologies that preserve the quality and shelf life of products.
    - Distribution: providing access to modes, channels or networks that transport and deliver products to buyers or consumers.
- Business planning and marketing services: These are the services that help value chain actors to sell their products to buyers or consumers. They include:
    - Marketing: providing information, advice, and training on marketing strategies and plans that identify and target potential customers, promote and sell products, monitor customer satisfaction and feedback, and evaluate marketing performance.
    - Business management: providing information, advice, and training on farming as a business that involves planning, budgeting, record keeping, cost control, risk management and decision making.
    - Market research: providing data, analysis or reports on market trends, opportunities or challenges that inform marketing decisions.
    - Business planning: providing assistance in developing business plans for farmers or cooperatives that outline their goals, strategies, activities, and resources.
- Contract negotiation and compliance: providing assistance in negotiating and complying with contracts with buyers or suppliers that specify the terms and conditions of transactions.
- Financial management: providing assistance in managing the financial aspects of the business such as cash flow, income statement, balance sheet or financial ratios.
- Organization services: These are the services that help value chain actors to organize themselves into groups or associations that can enhance their bargaining power, efficiency or impact. They include:
    - Farmer organization governance and functioning: providing information, advice and training on how to establish and manage farmer organizations

that have clear vision, mission, objectives, roles and responsibilities.
    - Collective marketing: providing information, advice and training on how to market products collectively through farmer organizations that can reduce transaction costs, increase market access or improve prices.
    - Group leadership: providing information, advice and training on how to develop and exercise leadership skills within farmer organizations that can motivate members, resolve conflicts or facilitate collaboration.
    - Record keeping: providing information, advice and training on how to keep records within farmer organizations that can track activities, performance or impact.
- Finance services: These are the services that help value chain actors to access finance for their businesses. They include:
    - Credit: providing loans or advances to value chain actors that can be used for working capital or investment purposes.
    - Savings: providing savings accounts or schemes to value chain actors that can be used for storing money or accumulating funds.
    - Insurance: providing insurance policies or schemes to value chain actors that can protect them from risks such as crop failure, price fluctuation or health problems.
- Brokering services: These are the services that help value chain actors to link with other actors in the chain or comply with legal, regulatory or certification requirements. They include:
    - Legal: providing information, advice or representation on legal issues such as contracts, disputes or rights.
    - Regulatory: providing information, advice, or assistance on regulatory issues such as licenses, permits or taxes.
    - Certification: providing information, advice, or assistance on certification issues such as standards, audits, or labels.
- Linking: providing information



# POLICY, REGULATION, AND STANDARDS

Policy, regulation, and standards are the rules and guidelines that govern the production, processing, marketing, and trade of agricultural products. They can affect the quality, safety, profitability, and sustainability of smallholder agriculture. Different value chains have different needs and interests in policy, regulation, and standards. The main areas of interest and potential collaboration in policy, regulation, and standards for six value chains will be highlighted in this toolkit: roots and tubers, dairy, grains, vegetables, livestock, and fish.

- Roots and tubers: This value chain is most interested in policy, regulation, and standards in three nodes: policy analysis, seed systems, and food processing. Some of the main issues are:
    - Policy analysis: understanding the impact of policies on the availability and affordability of quality seeds, especially for potatoes. This includes seed regulatory policies that address certification and quality control such as the Plant Health Inspectorate services.
    - Seed systems: complying with the regional trade and food safety standards for seeds. This includes ensuring that seeds are free from pests and diseases, have high germination rates, and meet the varietal purity requirements.
    - Food processing: meeting the nutritional and industrial needs of consumers with enhanced products such as orange-fleshed sweet potato and yellow cassava. This includes following the accreditation/certification procedures for food quality and safety.
- Dairy: This value chain is modestly interested in policy, regulation, and standards in two nodes: production systems and advocacy. Some of the main issues are:
    - Production systems: improving the animal health and welfare standards for dairy cows. This includes complying with the veterinary regulations, animal identification and traceability systems, animal feed standards and animal welfare codes.
    - Advocacy: influencing the policy environment to support the dairy sector. This includes engaging with the relevant stakeholders such as government agencies, industry associations, civil society organizations, and media to advocate for favorable policies on taxation, subsidies, tariffs, or quotas.
- Grains: This value chain is modestly interested in policy, regulation and standards in one node: food processing systems. The main issue is:
    - Food processing systems: improving the storage infrastructure for grains such as maize, rice or sorghum. This includes complying with the storage

regulations and standards that ensure the quality and safety of grains during storage. It also includes accessing storage facilities and services that are affordable and reliable.

- Vegetable: This value chain is not interested in policy, regulation, and standards.
- Livestock: This value chain is not interested in policy, regulation, and standards.
- Fish: This value chain is not interested in policy, regulation, and standards.

The lack of interest in policy, regulation, and standards by some value chains may reflect a hidden need that may need to be uncovered through sensitization and capacity building. Policy, regulation, and standards are essential for the business development of smallholder agriculture because they can:

a. Enhance the quality and safety of agricultural products for consumers.
b. Increase the value addition and profitability of agricultural products for producers.
c. Facilitate access to markets and trade opportunities for agricultural products.
d. Promote the sustainability and resilience of agricultural systems.

Notably, business development for smallholder agriculture is a critical aspect of boosting food security and livelihoods for small-scale farmers. However, the success of this endeavor is highly dependent on various factors, including supportive policies, regulations, and standards. Therefore, to effectively engage with policy and regulatory facilities, it is essential to,

a. Identify the main needs and interests in policy, regulation, and standards.
b. Find out what other value chains have similar or complementary interests in policy, regulation, and standards.
c. Seek opportunities to collaborate with other value chains on policy analysis, compliance, or advocacy.
d. Monitor and evaluate the impact of policy, regulation, and standards on the value chain performance.

In conclusion, policy, regulation, and standards are critical to the business development of smallholder agriculture. Organizations and stakeholders involved in this sector need to prioritize this domain and ensure that it receives adequate attention to ensure its success.



# OPERATIONAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To plan and implement ABLA effectively, the following guiding principles should be applied;

1. Priority setting and resource allocation: This principle helps you to decide which interventions are the most important and urgent to achieve your expected results and how to allocate your available resources accordingly. You can use criteria such as relevance, feasibility, impact, cost-effectiveness, or stakeholder preference to rank your interventions and assign their resources such as time, money, staff, or equipment. This way, you can avoid wasting resources on interventions that are not critical or aligned with your objectives.

2. Sequencing: This principle helps to determine the order or timing of the interventions. One can use logic, experience, or evidence to identify the dependencies or relationships among the interventions and arrange them in a logical sequence. For example, one can use a Gantt chart or a flow chart to show which interventions need to come first, which ones can be done in parallel, and which ones need to follow later. This way, it ensures that interventions are implemented efficiently and effectively without delays or gaps.

3. Principle of subsidiarity: This principle helps to choose the most appropriate level of operation for the interventions. Factors such as scope, scale, complexity, or stakeholder involvement can be used to decide whether interventions should be addressed at the lowest level possible (such as a specific node of a particular value chain), at a higher level (such as several nodes within a particular value chain or among several value chains), or at the highest level (such as a regional or cross-country level). This way, it ensures that interventions are implemented by the most suitable actors and in the most suitable context.

4. Team spirit: This principle helps to appreciate and leverage the diversity of expertise within and among the nodes of the value chains and the broader institutional and policy ecosystems. You can use skills such as communication, coordination, cooperation, and conflict resolution to work effectively in multidisciplinary teams that address multiple dimensions of the transformation process. You can also use tools such as team charter, roles, and responsibilities matrix, or team performance assessment to enhance your team spirit.

5. Partnerships: Partnerships are critical to establishing and maintaining relationships with other organizations that collaborate in ABLA-led activities while retaining their own organizational identity. One can use skills such as negotiation, facilitation, trust-building, and accountability to work effectively in partnerships that create synergies and complementarities. You can also use tools such as partnership agreements, memorandum of understanding, or partnership reviews to enhance your partnerships.

6. Planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning: This principle helps to plan and implement activities that deliver results and achieve impacts. You can use skills such as logical framework analysis, indicator development, data collection, and analysis, report writing and feedback to plan, monitor, evaluate, and learn from your activities. You can also use tools such as results framework, monitoring plan, evaluation plan, or learning plan to enhance your planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

To plan and implement interventions effectively in a specific value chain or node, it is essential to:

- Identify your value chain or node and the actors involved.
- Identify challenges and opportunities and define expected results.
- Form or join a multidisciplinary team that can address the challenges and opportunities
- Establish or join a partnership with other organizations that can collaborate in ABLA-led activities.
- Identify potential interventions and rank them according to priority setting and resource allocation criteria.
- Arrange interventions in a logical order according to sequencing methods.
- Choose the most appropriate level of operation for interventions according to the principle of subsidiarity factors.
- Plan, monitor, evaluate, and learn from the progress and impact of the interventions.

# Reference Materials


1. FARA Report on ABLA Framework, (Mbabu, A. Konge, and Munoko K. Musikoyo, 2022)
2. Gender Mainstreaming for Effective Multi-Stakeholder Processes, (FARA, EAFF, and ASARECA, 2022)
3. A Resource Manual for Training in Integrated Agricultural Research for Development (IAR4D) in Innovation Platforms, (Fatunbi et al, 2015)


# Key Supporting Institutions and Founders

**Key Support Institutions**

**AIRTEA Funder**

**ARIFA Institutions and Funder**

FARA
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